

# A Retreat to the Goal

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HE tramped slowly yet sturdily. He had set for himself exactly the sort of pace which a shrewd mind had ordained that his well-worn bones and muscles could keep up for a tramp of many miles. He kept to the pace.

He was a prodigal of a new variety. He had been on the verge of success. The least said about the quality of that success the better; yet success it would have been. And at the very threshold the man had turned himself about and beat that most ignominious and most glorious retreat of humanity, the retreat of the sinner from the strongholds and fleshpots of sin.

John Dunn could not have told why he had turned about. It was as if some power outside himself, yet projected by himself, had exerted a compelling force before which he was helpless. The day before he had not even dreamed of taking this course. He had been with comrades, enjoying to the full that glimpse of the verge of ill-wrought success.

The man had risen before dawn with his new resolve upon him. He had risen and set forth. He had the clothes he wore, and a little money in his pocket. Secure as he had been of the golden shower, he had lost recklessly at cards the night before. His clothes were unbefitting his manner of return. As soon as the shops were opened he stopped and made a purchase and sale. He emerged from the shop clad in the rough garb of a countryman, with not so much money in his pocket.

He was hardly past middle age; but he looked old with the keen light of the spring morning in his face.

Suddenly he was aware of a soft, padding movement behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a small mongrel dog, brown and thin,

with hide glistening in the sun. The dog looked up at him as if he were a god. He was so pathetically humble and beseeching and worshipful that the man started. His own unworthiness of anything like that, even in the understanding of a poor little mongrel dog, smote him fully for the first time. In the eyes of the dog he saw himself, and was shamed to the core.

The dog lay down and rolled in the spring grass, four little paws waving imploringly. The man spoke kindly, and the dog rose. He leaped to the man's caressing hand. John remembered a dog of his childhood, and he immediately named this stranger. "Hullo, Rover," said he. The dog acted as if he had always followed the call of love and mastery by that name.

John Dunn's face was happier as he walked on with the dog at heel. He thought of the superstition of his boyhood—"It is good luck to have a dog follow one."

The man and the dog progressed until high noon. Then they stopped in a place of sheer beauty. The man, gazing about, had a dazed feeling that it was unreal. The man and the dog sat beside a clear brook flowing, with breaks to the light like facets of brown jewels, over a bed of smooth pebbles. The brook flowed through a meadow-land, and its banks were blue with violets.

John Dunn had stopped at a country grocery and bought crackers and cheese. He divided with the dog. Then both ate, the dog with nose buried in violets. Then the man hollowed a hand and drank of the brook, which was sweet and cold. The dog crept close to the gently flowing water and lapped, too. Then the man lay back among the violets, the dog snuggled close, and both slept.

After an hour they woke and resumed their march. High purpose had so strengthened in the soul of the man that he felt almost intoxicated by it. Every

now and then he broke from his even pace and almost leaped along. At such times the dog would scurry ahead and return with lithe bounds, barking.

They went on until near sunset. It was true country now, a rolling farming land, with small villages pricked out by white church-spires, then farm-houses on the outskirts. John Dunn began to think about a place for the night. As with all wayfarers, his mind turned instinctively to a barn or a haystack. He had not enough money to pay for a lodging. He began to scrutinize the wayside. He saw no straw-stacks. He approached a large, white farm-house, with well-kept outbuildings. He decided that this could be no place for him. It had too prosperous a look.

As he passed the cow-barn a man with milk-pails crossed the yard to the house. He had closed the doors upon the rows of switching tails of sleek Jerseys and Holsteins. Everything was being made snug for the peaceful night.

John Dunn, as he came opposite the gate in the trim white fence which inclosed the front yard of the farm-house, was arrested by a woman's voice, shrill, tense, yet sweet.

"Good evening," came the words, as if addressed to a well-known neighbor.

A tall, thin, elderly woman, with a strange, unquenchable youth in her eager blue eyes, was standing at the gate.

John Dunn lifted his hat. "Good evening, madam," he returned.

The woman seemed greatly flattered. Never in all her life had she been dubbed "madam." She smiled tightly with her thin lips. She opened the gate. "Goin' far?" she inquired with almost fierce friendliness.

John Dunn heard a spit of hostility, and saw a large Maltese cat, back up and tail enormous, waving like a battle-flag, with great eyes of fear and hatred upon his dog. The dog got behind him, tail between its legs. The woman picked up a stick and shooed the cat, which fled like a gray shadow close to the ground, then clawed up a tree.

"He'll stay up there all night," remarked the woman. "He always does when he sees a dog. It won't hurt him. It ain't cold. We don't keep no dog, and the cat is awful scared of one. I

like dogs. I'd have a dog, but Pa don't like dogs. I'd like a dog, as this place is rather lonesome, and tramps come along. You don't look like a tramp."

The woman ended her statement with a faint, apologetic note of interrogation, and John Dunn looked at her perplexedly. He wondered if he were a tramp.

The woman continued hastily. "I'm sorry I spoke so," said she. "Of course I kin see you ain't no tramp. Do come right in. Where did you say you was goin'?"

"To Bixby Corners," replied John Dunn.

"Why, you don't say so!" cried the woman. "Why, I've got folks there. I was there two months ago. But that's over fifty miles away. You don't mean to walk there?"

John said something feebly about taking his time. The woman nodded knowingly and laughed.

"Oh, I see," said she. "You're one of them over-stout folks tryin' to walk it off. But you can't git to Bixby Corners to-night. You come right in. Pa and me and Billy have had our supper, but it ain't no trouble at all to git you something."

"If," said John, "you could let me sleep in the barn—"

The woman tossed her head affrontedly. "Me and my husband don't ask folks to sleep in no barn," said she, "when we've got two nice, clean spare chambers. You walk right in." She pushed the gate open.

John Dunn walked in, with his dog following. The woman led the way around the house to the side-door. She opened it and entered. John hesitated. He looked doubtfully at the poor little cringing dog.

"Oh, land sake! let the dog come in, too," said the woman. "He can go out in the kitchen, and Abby will give him some supper. Billy has just brought in the milk, too, and he will like some of that. He's a dretful thin dog. What's his name?"

"Rover."

"Rover, Rover, Rover," called the woman. The dog came at her call, shaking his lean hind-quarters and wagging violently.

"He acts like a real nice dog," said

the woman, "and Abby and Billy set a lot by dogs."

She opened a door at her left. "Abby," said she, "here's a dog that belongs to this gentleman. Give him plenty of supper, and the gentleman 'ain't had no supper, either. Jest mix up a few more flapjacks, while I set a plate for him in the dinin'-room. Come right in, mister."

John followed the woman into a room where a very large old man sat, quite filling up a great rocking-chair.

"Here, pa. I've brought you company," said the woman. "I stopped this gentleman from goin' to the Elm House at Wayne. He's goin' to stay here."

"How do you find yourself?" came a gruff voice from the chair. John saw a rather vague face, fringed with a white beard and smiling. Pa was always ready with his smile.

John said something indistinctly about kindness and hesitating to accept so much hospitality.

"Ma is tickled to death to hev company," said he. "She's sort of lonesome, 'specially sence our daughter Laury married an' went away. Billy is a good boy, but he ain't no talker, and ma likes to hev talkin'. I wa'n't never no talker myself, an' Billy takes arter me, I reckon. Laury was a real lively talker. Set down."

John Dunn sat down. He had never been so absolutely embarrassed in his life as he was before these simple people and their simple hospitality.

The woman ran in and lit a lamp. "Here's a lamp, and you kin see enough to talk," said she. "Supper will be ready before long. Your dog was 'most starved."

The old man stirred uneasily. "Dog?" said he.

"Now, pa," said the woman, "don't you git excited. It's a real nice, safe little dog; and your cat's up the apple-tree, and thar ain't no call for you to worry."

The woman flew out, her cotton skirts swishing. John Dunn looked about him. A sudden memory smote him with a pang. He might have been in his old boyhood home.

He sat silent, while the old man at the window nodded approvingly at him.

"I see you ain't much more of a talker than I be," he said. "Wall, that's right. Let the wimmen folks talk. Men ain't so much given that way. Natur' is natur'."

Then the woman came in with a joyful stir and announced supper, and John followed her into the dining-room, and again history repeated itself, almost to his undoing. Oh, how many suppers like that he had eaten before his wild blood had leaped barriers and his feet had gone astray!

It required all the man's resolution to overmaster that uncanny sense of having eaten recently this identical meal, but he was equal to it. He was, in reality, hungry, and his boyhood relish for boyhood food came back in a flood. He ate, and the woman watched, in the homely rapture of her kind, the feeding of a male creature.

Billy, the son, came in, and she said, simply, "This is my son; Billy, this is the gentleman who is goin' to stay here to-night."

"Glad to see ye," said the man. He was an old-young man who looked like his mother and spoke like his father.

Suddenly John Dunn remembered that these kindly people did not know his name. He also remembered in a flash that the woman had said she knew people in Bixby Corners. He had lied many times in his life, but never had a lie come so hard as the lie he now told.

"You don't even know my name," said he.

Mother and son nodded, and looked interrogatively at him.

"My name," said John Dunn, "is David Mann."

The door opened, and a woman of about the same age as his hostess entered. She was tightly trussed in starched calico.

"Abby, this gentleman is Mr. Mann," said the other woman.

"Abby is some relation to me on my mother's side," said the woman. "She lives with me, and we do the work together. I ain't able to do it alone, and it is so much nicer than keepin' a hired girl." She regarded Abby affectionately. The shadow of a smile flickered over Abby's face.

John Dunn finished his supper. Then

he returned to the sitting-room and remained there in absolute silence with the old man and Billy, listening to the faint click of the supper-dishes being washed. Then the woman and Abby entered and seated themselves, and a very strange thing happened. John Dunn, sitting there, heard the story of his own life, up to a certain point, from the woman. He listened, and realized a queer torture, as from viewing himself in some awful mirror of absolute truth.

The woman talked, with no intermission. She discoursed of the village of Bixby Corners, where John Dunn had been born. Her daughter Laura had married and gone there to live; and she had had an uncle who had lived there during a long life, and brought up a large family. John remembered them.

The woman discoursed upon the family into which her daughter had married, the Upton family, and John remembered them. Then the woman gave a summary of the whole village. She had often visited there in her youth. John began to have a vague impression of having seen her there. She knew about everything, either first-hand or from hearsay, that had happened in Bixby Corners for half a century.

And—she knew about John Dunn! He sat there and listened, with that sensation of strange torture, when she got to that.

"Old Gorham Dunn keeps the store in Bixby Corners," said she. "He's so old he can't do much now, but he gits there every morning and sets. His son Frank tends mostly to the business now, but they say he 'ain't got no business head, though he's as stiddy as a clock an' means real well. Laury says the business is all runnin' behind. Laury said she pitied old Mis' Dunn an' old Mr. Dunn, an' Minnie, too; thar's a daughter. They had a real nice place, a big house with a tower and two bay-windows in front; an' it 'ain't been painted for years, an' the roof leaks. They had a son named John, an' they give him every advantage. They sent him to college, an' had him larn a profession—had to mortgage the place to git the money.

"And Laury says folks don't think they've been keepin' up with the inter-

est, an' them poor old folks will lose their home. It is real pitiful, Laury says, but that good-for-nothin' boy's ma don't never speak of him. It's been years sence he run wild and went off, and they never heard any good of him till they begun to hear nothin' at all. They don't know whether he's alive or dead, but Laury says that folks say that his ma has kep' his room up for him—had that papered and the plaster mended when the paper an' plaster was droppin' off every other room in the house. I guess there ain't no doubt that them poor old folks is jest livin' in the hopes that that miserable poor tool will come back an' be petted jest the way the one was in the Bible."

The woman paused for breath, and Abby unexpectedly spoke.

"I never took no stock at all in that prodigal son," said she. "Eatin' a fatted calf, an' bein' dressed up. Hm! He'd been better wuth while if he'd hustled 'round an' put on overalls, an' done the chores, an' sold that calf an' made his pa and ma buy somethin' they'd been doin' without on account of his foolishness."

"Scripter is Scripter," said Abby's mistress, "and what don't seem sense to us is jest because we don't understand. It don't make much odds no-how, I guess. I reckon that scalawag ain't never goin' to go back, nor let his poor old pa and ma pass away easy, nohow."

The old man snored explosively in his chair. John welcomed the guttural snort. The woman ceased talking about Bixby Corners. She sprang up.

"It's past pa's bedtime; an' the gentleman must be all tuckered out, too," she said.

Pa woke up. "I 'ain't been asleep," he said. "I heard every word ye've said. Ye've talked a real stiddy streak, ma, but you don't often git such a chance."

"I don't see much company," agreed the woman. "I'd like it if somebody would drop in this way oftener."

In a few moments John Dunn found himself in what was evidently the very best guest-room in the house. It duplicated the best guest-room in his father's house—but not his own room. He had had that fitted up, after he went to

college, in a fashion that aroused both admiration and alarm among Bixby Corners people.

John heard the house astir at an early hour, and he rose. That morning his determination was so tense that it almost seemed evident. After breakfast he bade the people good-by, with shamed gratitude, and took again to the highway with his dog.

That night he and the dog slept in a barn. They reached Bixby Corners two days later, in the afternoon. John walked straight to the store, the queer store of such nondescript merchandise as to be almost incredible. Over the door of the long frame building was the sign:

GORHAM DUNN.

GROCERIES AND DRYGOODS.

Hay and Feed. Brooms. Tin and Wooden Ware.

John had often laughed at the sign, designed by his poor father to be comprehensive of what was almost incomprehensible. He did not laugh now. He saw a child's gaily trimmed hat in one of the windows, beside tomato-cans, a bolt of calico, and a stack of brooms and gardening utensils, and his stern mouth did not relax. He even remembered how a discarded pulpit from the Congregational church had been kept in the back of the store, without the slightest reversion to the old mirth.

The day was quite warm. The store door stood open. Two men sat on a settee on the sloping piazza. One sat on a keg beside the door.

John advanced and looked blankly at the old man, who looked blankly at him. Then John saw his own father also in the door, seated farther back in an arm-chair. Gorham Dunn's old head lopped over on his breast. He was napping.

"Hullo!" said the other old man, and Gorham roused himself. He looked at his own son with absolute lack of recognition.

"Hullo, Frank," he called, rather feebly.

John Dunn's brother Frank, lean and lank and homely, with an expression of patience that was almost forcible, came forward. He did not know his brother.

He gave the usual interrogative grunt of the country merchant to an unknown customer. John spoke.

"I don't want to buy anythin'," said he, instinctively adopting the dialect. "I want a job in the store."

His father straightened up and looked at him. The other old man stopped chewing and stared at him with dim blue eyes. The men on the settee rose and came forward. Frank Dunn and his father looked at each other.

"Ask him if he knows anythin' about keepin' store," said the old man. His mouth trembled a little and his eyes twitched. Frank asked.

"Orter," replied David Mann, who had been John Dunn. "Brung up in the business. My own father kep' a store like enough to this to be its own brother."

"Ask him ef he used to tend store fur his father," said Gorham Dunn. Frank asked.

"Hed to when I was a young man," replied David Mann. "Got a whalin' ef I didn't."

"Ask him ef he's kep' on tendin' store," said the old man. Frank asked.

"Been in business for myself in town," replied David. "Pardner wasn't no good. He lit out, and I've come huntin' a job when I'm gittin' over bein' young, too."

The loafers laughed at the feeble joke.

Gorham Dunn and his son Frank talked apart. The old man had risen from his arm-chair and the two had withdrawn to the back of the store. The old man's voice was heard, quite strong and shrill. "Ask him what he wants fur pay."

Frank shambled forward and asked.

"Gosh A'mighty! 'Most anythin' that 'll keep me from starvin'," replied David. The little dog, snuggled close to him, wagged propitiatingly, as if he understood every word.

Finally David Mann, otherwise John Dunn, was engaged to work in his father's store.

Gorham Dunn was a bit distrustful. He wished to keep this stranger under his own roof. It was arranged that David was to occupy an attic room, unfinished but comfortable enough, which he remembered well. The hired man

used to occupy it; but the days of hired men for the Dunn family were over.

Gorham and Frank had discussed putting David in one of the spare rooms, but had met with strenuous objection.

"Ef," said David, "you 'ain't got some sort of hole under the ruff where you can stow me away, me and my dog will light out. Room up in the garret was plenty good enough for the man that tended my father's store when I was a boy, an' I guess it's good enough for me."

David took off his coat. A wagon laden with bags of seed-corn had drawn up in front of the store. He helped his brother and the farmer who brought the corn to unload; then he and his brother stowed it away, and he assisted in selling the farmer some groceries. He was secretly elated at his own handiness. He was also surprised, but he need not have been. It was that very versatility, that power of adaptation to all situations, which had been largely instrumental in the wreck of his life. It was not at all wonderful that the same agency which had wrecked might build.

When David went home with his father that night he was conscious of an almost childish fear. Suppose his mother should recognize him? Suppose his sister Minnie should? He had learned that Minnie was still at home, unmarried. Old man Dunn was garrulous.

"Minnie was keepin' company with a real likely young man when she was a girl," he told his new assistant. "Then somethin' come up. Minnie was real proud and high-strung an' she wouldn't stand much. She wouldn't give in an inch, and that was the end on't. I reckon she felt it some, but she never let on. Dun'no' what her ma and me would hev done without her ef she had got married and gone away, though."

The Dunn house had been originally one of the finest and most pretentious in the village. Now the returning son viewed it with a pang. It was suffering, as human dwellings seem actually to suffer, from premature old age. Gorham Dunn had built the house before his beloved son had come of age. The son knew well enough that it represented his poor father's old proud hopes of him and their decline. The returning

man looked at the house, and seemed to see in its dingy walls from which the glossy white paint had either disappeared or was evident in blisters of decay, in its sagging roof from which a zigzag weather stain of some old, fierce storm came down the south wall, in a chimney which needed topping, in the door-step which creaked beneath his unworthy feet, a faithful symbol of himself in his utter failure.

"Go easy on that step," advised his father. "Frank has got to fix it, now you've come. He 'ain't had a minute. That step ain't safe. It'll land somebody with a broken leg ef it ain't fixed."

"I kin fix it," said the new-comer, eagerly. "I'll git up early to-morrer an' fix it, ef you'll give me a hammer an' some nails an' ends of boards."

"Then you're handy?"

"Always was."

The old man sighed. "My other son was," he said. "He was born handy. He went to college an' learned a profession, so he didn't naturally do much with his hands, but he was born handy." The old man pointed to something in an apple-tree near the door. "See that bird-house?" he said. "My other son made that. It's got two rooms, an' the wrens come back to it every year."

The man looked. How he remembered! The memory seemed to tear his heart. Then they entered the house. "Come right in," said old man Dunn.

David followed him. The side-door led into an entry. There was a black-walnut tree for hats and wraps. That black-walnut tree seemed, to the returned wanderer, a menace of memory. How many times he had hung his hat on it as he hung it now! On the left of the entry was the dining-room. David heard the clink of dishes.

"Minnie is gettin' supper," old man Dunn remarked. David understood there was no maid. He remembered two, always, before he had dissipated the family fortune.

On the right was the sitting-room. David followed his father in there. His mother sat beside the window.

"We've got a new man to work in the store, ma," said old man Dunn. "He's used to tendin' store, an' it's goin' to take a heap off Frank an' me."

The old woman beside the window looked up, and her returning son saw in her something very exquisite. The mother of them all had changed the most, but she had changed for wonderful beauty, surpassing that of youth and prime. The son, who had not seen her for twenty years, started and paled. He would not have known his mother. All her pleasant, matronly curves were gone. She looked shorter. She was not such a very old woman, but she seemed to represent age fixed beyond any change until the final one, death. She was very slight. Her features were very small and clear. Her hair, still abundant, covered her little head like a cap of silver. She wore a soft black dress with a little pearl brooch at the throat. Her hands, in her lap, were not wrinkled, but so delicate and thin that they looked like pale flowers. The old woman suggested at once the most fragile loveliness and a wonderful strength that could enable such fragility to exist at all. She was like some delicate field-flower which, even to the winter winds and storms, will not completely yield up its personality, but still stands, a silvery semblance of its summer self, yielding yet unyielding.

The man's mother looked up at him, and he dropped his eyes before the dim blue outlook of hers.

"I'm glad you've got somebody to help, pa," she said. Her voice had grown very thin. It was like a sweet wind-whisper through meadow-reeds. Then she added, directly to the man, "I hope you will make yourself at home."

He remembered that his mother had always spoken more correctly than his father. She had been fond of books. He remembered also his unspoken childish conviction that whatever discipline he had came from her, not from his adoring father.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. Then the two pairs of eyes met. If she recognized her son, she made no sign.

"He says he wants to have the garret room, ma," said old man Dunn.

"I think he will find it comfortable," said the old woman. "I remember Jane liked it. Jane was a hired girl we had for twelve years."

"He has a little dog, but you like dogs," said old man Dunn.

"I think there was a bone left from dinner," said the old woman, in her sweet, thin voice.

A bell rang. "Supper's ready," said Gorham Dunn.

David found his hardest encounter where he least expected it. Minnie had changed hardly at all. It was wonderful how little Minnie had changed in twenty years. She had kept her figure and her complexion and her pretty hair. Of course, Minnie was much younger than he. She had been a mere girl when he had left home, but—twenty years of wear and tear upon the fine skin of a woman, upon her silky hair, upon her tender figure—and to find her like this! David, looking at Minnie and finding her so little changed, except in size, felt that she surely must at once recognize him.

But Minnie did not. If there were a lingering doubt about the mother, there was none about the sister. David sat at the table and ate supper with his own father and mother and sister, and, so far as any outward sign went, was absolutely unknown and unsuspected. However, the strain upon him was so great that he resolved, and was able to carry out his resolve, that in future Frank should eat with the family, and he would be the one to keep store and eat at the second table.

He had never been so relieved in his life as he was to find himself back at the store. Not many customers came before Frank returned from his own supper. By this time David knew that a rival grocery had been established a little farther down the road. He remembered the man who owned it as a fat boy, much freckled. His name was Silas Towns. Gorham Dunn and his son Frank were much perturbed by this competition, which was of recent date.

"Guess there won't be many customers; not so many but you can handle 'em," Frank told his brother as he set out for home. "Silas Towns is getting some of our best ones away. He don't keep any better stuff than we do, and he don't sell no cheaper, but his store is new and sort of fancy, and it don't take much to tole folks away."

Frank's voice rang sadly. He looked old and tired, and had the expression of those who have not tasted the savor of the joys of this life, only its duties. After he had gone David reflected that probably because of him his brother had missed his own birthright; had not married, nor had a glimpse of the world outside the little village and the rank old store.

David walked about the place, and did some thinking. He was a shrewd man, exceedingly quick-witted and full of expedients. It had been so much more to his discredit that he had made such a failure of his life. All the time he had known better and had been perfectly able to do better.

Finally he was disturbed by a customer. A man wanted to buy a bag of flour. David was perfectly competent to conclude that transaction.

"Goin' to clerk it here?" asked the man—a dry, lank fellow who owned a little farm on the river road. David remembered him.

"Reckon I'll make a try at it," he said.

"Well, I'm glad Frank and the old man hev got some help," said the customer. "Old man's been failin' lately, and Frank wa'n't never exactly cut out for storekeepin', though he's as good as they make 'em. He's 'most too good, and he 'ain't never had anything but drudgery. His folks spent everything on that good-for-nothin' John that went off and wa'n't never heard of afterward. Reckon he wound up in state prison. Everything had to go for him. T'other son didn't git nothin' but the hard work, an' nothin' for doin' it. And Minnie, she lost her beau because he insinnerated somethin' about that good-for-nothin' brother of hern, an' she flared up. Ain't none of the hull family anybody ever darse say anythin' agin him to; an' it's as much as twenty year since he went to the devil. Bad rub-bish!"

The man went out, carrying his flour-bag, and David resumed his examination of the store. It was difficult, because the place was poorly lit with oil-lamps. David found a lantern, and used that. The old store was a species of museum. In it was seen enormous waste. David

shook his head. Gorham Dunn's business methods must have sorely slackened since his son John's boyhood, and poor Frank could not have been especially fitted for his task. However, as the man examined, a scheme grew in his head. Suddenly he knew that, had he remained right there, that honorable old store would not have borne its present aspect. In him was the true business instinct. It had lain latent. Now it suddenly reared its head.

"Father's store is going to pay!" said John Dunn. And he was right. The little village was fairly agape over the changes suddenly worked in Gorham Dunn's old store. Much was done very early in the morning. Much was done at night. Secrecy was observed as far as possible. It seemed miraculous when Dunn's old country store became spick and span. The very settee for the village loungers was changed for a new one. The sagging roof of the piazza showed plumb-lines and glistened with new shingles. Vines were planted around the new pillars which supported the roof.

Inside, the change was more marked. By degrees, so as not to interfere with the trade, a new floor was laid. A new board ceiling replaced the hideously bulging one of smoke-blackened plaster. There were even new counters, and an old cabinet-maker who lived in the village had constructed stools and arm-chairs out of the old Congregational pulpit. The new man had visions of a soda-fountain, but for that there was need to wait. All the good stock of the store was arranged in a manner to do credit to an artist. The walls containing tinned goods were studies in color. The drygoods counter was a revelation to the village women.

Then — came the prize-packages! That was the new man's pet scheme; but he needed assistance, and he got it from his sister Minnie. He privately concluded that Minnie and he were the business heads of the family. One evening he had a long talk with her in the kitchen, and, the next day being Sunday, they made a surreptitious visit of inspection to the store. Minnie looked keenly at the sugar, the flour, the chocolate and cocoa, and other things which



had been dismissed from the up-to-date stock. She cocked her pretty brown head on one side, and her bright eyes shone indignantly.

"It takes a woman to run some things," said she. "Land! If I had known pa and Frank were letting things go to waste so! Here are yards and yards of faded gingham, too. Why did they let it stay in the window so long? And look at all this fly-specked ribbon. It is clear waste."

Her unrecognized brother regarded her shrewdly. "Struck me a woman like you might do somethin' to a lot of this truck so it wouldn't be waste," he remarked.

Minnie looked at him. He explained his ideas. The woman's cheeks bloomed pink. She looked years younger with sheer enthusiasm.

The prize-packages at Dunn's, tied up daintily and given with every dollar's worth of merchandise sold, were from the first a great success. Minnie's little cakes and bags of home-made candies, her aprons, old lady Dunn's iron-holders and knitted washcloths, and so on, all heaped together in a great clothes-basket that was trimmed with fringed pink and green tissue paper, and all tied up nicely with pretty blue tape, met with wild approval. Dunn's customers doubled in a week.

Old Gorham Dunn was tremulous with delight. "That new feller knows jest how to take hold," he told his son Frank, who nodded happily.

There was not an envious strain in Frank Dunn's whole make-up. He was only too glad to have the burden lifted from his faithful but inefficient shoulders.

At the end of some weeks the new man, after a colloquy with Gorham and Frank, sought out Silas Towns in his rival store and made certain propositions to him which were accepted without much hesitation. Silas Towns had the making of a shrewd business man in him. He made a good deal with Gorham for his own stock-in-trade, and became an interested, though silent, partner.

Strangely enough, old lady Dunn was the only one who evinced no especial pleasure. When Minnie suggested that Dave be given her recreant brother

John's old room, she fairly cowered before her mother's gaze.

"No man ever goes into that room to sleep until he's proved himself worthy," said the old woman, in her sweet, reedy voice.

She was almost uncanny in her fragility and hardness. Minnie reflected that her mother had always been the severe one of the family about the beloved recreant son and brother. The mother had often chastised with that thin, lady-hand of hers when the lad had been a child, Minnie remembered. She had not even defended him when he had fallen from his high estate of proud and honored youth in his father's house. In her own family she was so stern that they had almost considered her unfeeling. Once her husband had taken her to task.

"Anybody would think the poor boy wa'n't your son at all, ma, the way you act," Gorham had said, and his wife had faced him proudly.

"Anybody would think him my son for that very reason," said she. "Do you think I am going to take the part of my own son when I know he doesn't deserve it?"

"You were always sort of hard with him, ma."

"I wish I had been harder," John Dunn's mother had said. "If I had been harder it would have proved I loved him better than I loved myself. Now, sometimes, I don't know. But I do know that if I have been a selfish mother, it is no reason for me to shame my son more than he has shamed himself, by denying he has done wrong."

After that John had seldom been mentioned in the family. Scrupulously, twice a year, the boy's room had been cleaned. Then it was closed, and the curtains drawn, as if some one lay in death behind them.

The man in the store, whenever he passed this closed door, realized a little pang. He could not control it. He had overheard his mother deny his right to his old room. He had admired her for it. He admired the exquisite, strong old woman more and more, and she daily gained more power to give him pain, and she used her power.

Finally her husband, her daughter,

and her other son were aghast at her treatment of the person whom they knew as David Mann. Old Gorham talked to Minnie about it.

"You'll have to say a leetle to your ma, I guess, Minnie," he said. "First thing we know, Dave won't stand so much, an' he'll be leavin'; an' I dun'no' what Frank an' me would do without him, that's a fact."

Minnie and her father and Frank were in the kitchen after supper, and Minnie was washing the dishes. It was Sunday night, and all were at home.

"I feel sort of worried myself," said Frank. "I can't think what's got into ma."

With that he took up a great pail of refuse and was going out to feed the pig, when a sweet, reedy little voice came from behind him.

"Just set down that swill," said old lady Dunn, and her voice and manner dignified the homely little speech. "Let Dave do it."

Frank stared at his mother. She called, remorselessly: "Dave, Dave, come here. It's time to feed the pig."

David Mann, in his Sunday clothes, heard her. He was sitting on the front piazza. He came around through the side-door, took the pail from the other man's hand, and went out with it.

"Ma, it won't do!" gasped old Gorham.

"Frank has fed the pig long enough. It's another man's turn," said the inexorable old lady.

"He'll leave."

"If he leaves, he's not worth keeping," responded the old lady. Then she went back to her place in the sitting-room. But always after that David Mann did the menial tasks about the place, instead of Frank. Ordered by his mother, he milked, cleaned the barn, chopped wood, and performed the tasks of a servant, although both his father and brother remonstrated.

"It beats all what has got into ma," Gorham told the man whom he knew as David. "The way she orders you around ain't suit the rest of us. We know it ain't your place to do all them chores."

David laughed. "Reckon it's my place to do anythin' I kin do," he said.

"Ma seems to hev somethin' agin' you, an' you 'ain't done nothin' but be a god-send to us ever sence you come," said Gorham. "You won't think of leavin' because she seems so sort of queer? Women is queer."

"I ain't likely to leave because she asks me to do anythin' I kin do," said the man.

He and his father had been talking out in the yard. It was six months since he had come. The apple-tree which held the bird-house tossed yellow branches over their heads. The house wherein the Dunns dwelt had been painted, and the roof patched. The unrecognized son could hear his sister singing as she cleared up the supper-dishes. Recently a lover had come to her, a very good man who had loved her always, and she had loved him, making no sign. She had forgotten, years and years, the love of her youth. Minnie had refused to listen while affairs were so adverse with their family. Now it was different. The mortgage would soon be paid. A maid could be kept.

The brother heard the happy little song, and smiled. He went out to the barn to finish the milking. His little dog followed him. He milked and carried the last pail to the house. Then he returned to close the barn for the night.

He started. Old-lady Dunn stood there. Her shawl flew out in the wind like sharply pointed gray wings. Her hair stood up like an aureole around her delicate face, an aureole of live silver. The little dog left his master and wagged affectionately around her. Despite her treatment of David, the dog always left him for her. She patted the silky brown head.

"Here," she said to David, "you haven't finished your chores. Go an' pick some of the windfalls and give them to the cows. They like apples."

The man obeyed. He took off his hat, passed around to the orchard behind the barn, returned with his hat full of apples, and fed them to the cows.

"Get another," ordered the old lady. David obeyed.

When he emerged from the barn after feeding the cows for the second time he looked interrogatively at the woman. She nodded.

"That will do," said she. "Now you can fasten up the barn."

David obeyed. Then he looked with actual timidity at the frail little woman-creature who dominated him. She lifted her right hand, and a white diamond gleamed. He had given her that diamond when he was a boy. He had saved the money for it out of his allowance. He had never seen her wear it since his return.

She held out her hand and moved toward the house, and the man followed. Minnie saw them coming and opened the door. Gorham and Frank were there. Old lady Dunn and the man they called Dave entered. Old lady Dunn looked at them; then she turned and pointed at the man, and the diamond gleamed.

"This is my own son. He has come home," she said, and her voice rang out silvery with triumph, like a fine trumpet.

The others exclaimed. The old woman faced them, dauntless. "I knew him all the time," said she. "None of the rest of you knew him, but I am his mother. I knew."

"Is it you, John?" queried old Gorham in a shaking voice.

John bowed his head. His face was working.

Frank sprang forward and took him by the hand. Frank was choking with repressed tears. Minnie came forward and kissed him; then she sank into a chair and wept aloud.

Old Gorham put his hand, trembling as if with palsy, on the man's shoulder.

"Is it you, John?" John bowed his head again.

Old Gorham suddenly waxed radiant. "He's come home! My son's come home!" he cried out in a great voice. "My son's come home, an' he's made good! I'll show 'em. I guess nobody's goin' to say nothin' more agin' my son. He's the smartest man in these parts, I don't keer who he is!"

Old Gorham shook his son John back and forth by his passive shoulders. "He's come home, home!" he shouted. Then he turned to the old lady. "What in Sam Hill made you treat him so durned mean fur, ma," he demanded, "when you knew all the time?"

Old lady Dunn lifted her head. She looked like a queen throned upon the trials of her whole life. A lovely color came into her soft old cheeks; her eyes shone with blue light. That old flower of life's field which had remained intact as to its flower-shape, though smitten hard by winds of time and grief, seemed suddenly, by virtue of some fine strength of individuality almost beyond the mortal, to bloom anew. She gazed at her son, and the fragrance of the love and sorrow and infinite patience of a woman for her child sweetened the very soul of the man. She smiled a heavenly smile.

"I wanted to make sure that my son had come back," said she. Then she turned to Minnie. "I opened the windows in your brother John's room this morning," said she. "Now I think you had better go and make up the bed."

